

Special Education Advisory Committee Annual Parent Survey



Qualitative Analysis - Annual Parent/Guardian Survey

Child Research, Evaluation, Data, and Information Technology
Services (CREDITS, LC)

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Executive Summary

As part of the Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS) system, the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) is a state-mandated advisor tasked with creating and maintaining an equitable learning environment for children with disabilities. To help with their work in maintaining and creating an inclusive environment for children with disabilities, SEAC assesses parental satisfaction using annual surveys. SEAC contacted Dr. Adam Winsler of Child Research, Evaluation, Data, and Information Technology Services (CREDITS, LC) and George Mason University for assistance with a qualitative analysis of data from the 2019-2020 Annual Parent/Guardian Survey. Detailed, qualitative data analyses were conducted on all open-ended parent responses on the survey, which identified prominent, recurrent themes and helpful suggestions for SEAC and LCPS. Common suggestions from parents included the following:

- Increased training, resources, and attention given to mental health for students
- More social skills training
- More stability over time needed for case managers
- Additional ways to help support parents at home
- Increased communication and collaboration with parents
- More attention to adaptive technology, and to the challenges of dyslexia for writing

Helpful suggestions were also provided by parents for extended school year (ESY) services, dealing with bullying, special programs such as Academies of Loudoun and Monroe Tech, and navigating distance learning during the COVID pandemic.

Introduction

The Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) is a state-mandated committee that advises the Loudoun County Public School Board in creating an inclusive and equitable environment for children with disabilities. SEAC identifies areas of need, advises policy, procedures, and plans to improve and deliver high-quality special education services. The Annual Parent/Guardian Survey identifies areas of need, which allows the committee to advise the school board and address existing needs and disparities. This report describes findings from the 2019-2020 SEAC Annual Parent/Guardian Survey, which measures parental satisfaction with provided services. SEAC submitted their annual report for 19-20, which provided an excellent overview of parental satisfaction for students with disabilities within LCPS.

To provide a more in-depth look into the satisfaction of parents, SEAC reached out to Dr. Adam Winsler of Child Research, Evaluation, Data, and Information Technology Services (CREDITS, LC) and George Mason University for additional analysis of the 2019-20 SEAC Annual Parent/Guardian Survey data. This report describes the second of a two-part analysis – a qualitative analysis of the parent survey's open-ended, free response items. In addition to rating their satisfaction on 4- or 5-point scales (the subject of prior reports), parents were invited to comment on a number of different areas freely, including LCPS special education services, instructional services received, communication with LCPS, inclusion and equity, suggestions for SEAC meetings, student mental health concerns, and finally parents' experiences with distance/virtual learning during the pandemic school closure of Spring 2020. The present evaluation analyzed the qualitative items included in the 2019-20 SEAC Annual Parent/Guardian Survey. The overall goal of the analysis was to identify and summarize recurrent themes and concerns expressed by parents/guardians and compile and organize the specific questions, requests, and suggestions made by parents/guardians.

Analysis of Qualitative Survey Data

The 2019-2020 survey was administered in English and Spanish and had 2,953 responses (1,844 complete responses and 1,109 incomplete). We examined all responses to each of the open-ended items. As to be expected, not everyone chose to respond to the open-ended items.

The number of open-ended responses received varied from about 90 to around 1,200, depending on the specific item/question.

Our analysis strategy started by entering all text responses into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package. NVivo flagged the top 25 most recurring words within the parent comments for each item that helped guide the next analyses steps. We found, however, that this word-level analysis was limited and not that helpful. Instead, we went through each parent comment (in English and Spanish) one by one and manually coded each and grouped them according to the main recurring themes to provide a more in-depth look into parents' concerns and sentiments. We then picked representative quotes from each theme to be included in the report below. We also compiled a list of the parents' specific (reasonable) suggestions for each item and kept track of how often the same issue/suggestion came up. Also included in each section below are these suggestions, either as a representative example from among many or as a one-off suggestion.

As to be expected, given that survey respondents typically only complete open-ended survey items if they are unhappy about something, and the fact that many of the survey items asked parents specifically for things that could be improved, the majority of the comments could be classified as 'negative.' Also as is to be expected given that the survey took place during the COVID pandemic with families having to deal with homeschooling and remote education during the school closure (and there were survey items that asked parents what their distance learning experience was like), there was a lot of frustration expressed by parents. However, there were plenty of positive comments and praise for LCPS special education services as well. Often, however, the positive comments included the names of individual teachers, schools, or personnel, so those comments were not included in the report. Although we have included some positive comments in the report below, we ultimately decided that, in the end, it would be most useful for SEAC and LCPS to hear about areas of concern and suggestions for improvement. Thus, we focused on the suggested areas for improvement.

Each section of the report below represents a summary of responses for one topic/item on the survey. The most frequent themes are discussed in order, starting with the most common responses, and then listed are potentially helpful suggestions provided by parents.

Equitable Access and/or Inclusion in Programs/Resources (School Level)

The open-ended question asked here was the following:

“In your view, what strengths and/or issues exist at your student's school in relation to equitable access to and/or inclusion in programs and resources for students with disabilities (e.g., specials, after school activities, school-sponsored events, social skills/guidance, technology, general education, etc.)?”

There were several parents who were generally **happy** with LCPS’ effort at inclusion and equity, saying things such as:

“It seems like they try hard to keep everything equitable for all students.”

“There are lot of external workshops and programs that LCPS offers to the community. These have been wonderful and informative. IEP managers have always been good on sharing out these events which is appreciated.”

“General ed-participated in field trips, school performances, etc. The school did a good job. I think more could be done to create relationships and connections between neurotypical and special needs kids. To help destigmatize special needs and make it so the other students aren’t scared or wary. More education and awareness.”

However, numerous parents wished there could be more opportunities, especially for those on the autism spectrum and for neurodiverse individuals. A common desire was for more help with their child’s **social skills**, with comments such as these:

“Social skills”

“There are very few opportunities for real inclusion especially with regard to socialization and social skill building after and during school”

“There needs to be more access to social skills guidance and groups to help with this.”

“Teaching social skills to students with ASD should be a targeted goal. Creating a buddy program would be helpful. Pairing ASD students with typically developing

students would also be beneficial for both students.”

“Two major concerns: There are no social skills programs offered at my child’s school and the counselor has significantly downplayed our mental health concerns regarding our child. Following extensive discussion in IEP meeting about serious mental health concerns, still no services (by a qualified provider) were offered/given.”

Many parents asked for more **after-school** activities:

“My son has access to programs during the school day, but there is no accommodation/access to after- school programs for him. This needs to change!”

“There should be more support for students with disabilities to attend after school activities. It’s hard to send my child to a fun club with no support available to manage behavioral or social needs.”

“We feel (the school) needs to make a concentrated effort towards creating programs for students with disabilities to include more inclusive opportunities. Suggestions: social events at the school for students with disabilities (Dance, ice cream social, sports events).”

“PTA-sponsored events need to be more aware of students with varying abilities.”

“While LCPS does a wonderful job helping my child during school hours, they do not provide us any resources to help outside of school with homework / improving the areas they lack in like independence. I have asked for suggestions but never get a direct answer.”

A few parents had concerns about **communication** about special events:

“The way information is shared and presented, it is assumed that the student has the executive skills and experience to research and take in information. This is not the case for many kids with IEPs who take on information in different ways and miss out on many opportunities.”

“Communication with students joining extracurricular / after school activities can be very low. For example, where and when they meet, if a meeting is cancelled, etc. The school calendar is not updated in a timely way (or at all), so this can be very confusing. We try to stay on top of communication with the event organizer, but this can be a real

challenge for a student with a disability to stay positive about the activity when they're confused about something, or they're not receiving the information they need to be successful.”

Specific **suggestions** from parents in this area included requests for (in order of frequency):

- Social skills class/support
- More social events for students with disabilities: Dance, ice cream social, sports events
- Dyslexia-focused education strategies
- Unified Sports / Special Olympics / ROTC
- Best buddies
- Sensory Rooms
- Support/aid for camp and extracurriculars

Strengths and Issues in Equitable Access to Resources (LCPS level)

The open-ended question asked here was the following:

In your view, what strengths and/or issues exist within LCPS related to students with disabilities and equitable treatment and/or access to resources (e.g., mental health services, Academies of Loudoun, Monroe Tech, specialized programs, etc.)?

Several parents noted **Positives/Strengths**:

“We appreciate the small group as well as the one-on-one attention that the students receive. This has helped our student to keep on pace with classmates.”

“I’ve been very grateful for and impressed with the support provided for my child. I do feel like more resources would be beneficial in the sense that more lunch bunches and group sessions to help kids with and without special needs work through anxiety and learn/improve communication and interpersonal communication skills.”

“This program is like no other our child has been able to achieve tremendous progress and our child at the same time loves being there unlike other schools out of the area.”

“A strength is the staffing available to help students with disabilities one on one.”

“I think LCPS has the resources available, so that is a STRENGTH.”

A few parents noted **how hard parents have to work** to strive for equity:

“There is only access if a parent fights for it”

“Students with disabilities still have an uphill battle for services - qualification and execution are challenging and parents are still in the position to strongly advocate what should be minimally provided.”

“The parent must solicit this information. LCPS could be more communicative in providing info on all resources available.”

“Once my child had an IEP, there don't seem to be too many issues in getting needed supports, but trying to get the IEP originally was jumping through hoops, despite coming to the table with a lot of information from the preschool and the doctor.”

A few parents were concerned that their **child was not treated equitably**:

“They are definitely not treated equally. Students without disabilities seem to be taught to tolerate my disabled child at best. There weren’t efforts to ensure my child was included. The solution was always to remove him, not find out how to meaningfully include him.”

“There are many times my child has complained of feeling left out during specials. Specifically, art class and music class.”

“Regarding equity, think some teachers lack patience and understanding of my child's needs”

Numerous parents were concerned that their **child’s mental health support**:

“There is not enough mental health support throughout the county to support the sheer volume of students, disabled or not. An increase to FTEs for counselors, school psychiatrists, social workers and the like would be instrumental in bettering the path for students who struggle with ED or any multitude of other mental health concerns.”

“Not enough mental health interventions sought proactively. Music and art therapies work well for soothing agitated students and should be considered as electives for students with disabilities. If these opportunities were available as a class/elective for students it would go a long way to reduce stresses that, left unattended, result in negative behaviors.”

A few commented specifically on the **Academies of Loudoun and Monroe Tech** opportunities:

“There is a problem with access to the Academies of Loudoun, Monroe Tech and other specialized programs. So much of the qualifications are based on test scores, grades and math level. How is it fair for a child who is behind in many areas? By these criteria, they will never be considered for these programs.

LCPS must meet their educational needs for them to have access.”

“We feel it wasn't clearly communicated as to the expectations and qualifications for the entrance process to the Academies of Loudoun, particularly AET and AOS. This was the same for all students, but it would help to have precise information as to what factors will be taken into account when the student applies. For someone with a cognitive disability, this can be very confusing.”

An additional subsection here asked parents

“What additional resources might be helpful?”

Many parents expressed frustration in not finding out about resources available for their child and made good suggestions about what might be done to improve communication in this area:

“How do I know? You need to tell me what’s available!”

“Helping parents know what is available. Frequently if you don’t know what to ask for your child then they may not receive necessary support.”

“Emails to what is available at grade level, not an email to read for all grade levels - it’s overwhelming to get a 30-pg document”

“A document that lists all resources available for children in Loudoun County who have disabilities/IEP's. And for someone to go over the list with you at your IEP meeting and give more clarification/details on those resources”

“Specific point of contact for each school/grade”

“Send home fliers or pamphlets with announcements and information about such resources, send texts with links to announcements and information about such resources”

“Maybe a monthly newsletter to inform us of events and/or resources”

“A flow chart of who does what? Without a bunch of weird titles that nobody understands?”

“Being provided with an email each year that lists the additional resources that apply to
Here there were many calls for **more support early in the IEP process**, as exemplified by the following quotes:

“LCPS should provide a class to parents who are just beginning the IEP process as well as a packet of materials and resources.”

“Parent liaisons - how to navigate the system and understand what questions to ask in the IEP process”

“Parent liaison to help better explain the process and their rights. It can be intimidating.”

“IEP advocates for parents. Basic classes that help parents understand the basic parts of an IEP

and their roles and responsibilities from a non-school employee”

“A one/two-page IEP primer explaining terminology and processes could be helpful to parents new to LCPS.”

An impressive number of parents asked for more help for children with dyslexia and dysgraphia:

“Dyslexia specialists”

“Training on reading strategies, apps, tech supports, audio books--textbooks, copy of class notes for students with reading/ writing difficulties.”

“Would desperately like LCPS to provide additional after school tutor who is specialized in teaching dyslexic students. When I asked for resources for dysgraphia and dyslexia, I was told there weren't any tools for support for that diagnosis.”

“Resources and utilization of technology to better support student with dyslexia. More assistive technology for dyslexic students.”

“Resources and supports for both students and parents to address students with deficits in executive function, dysgraphia and dyslexia.”

“Have access to reading/writing programs to use at home and through the summer”

Some parents made suggestions about how to improve progress monitoring:

“Webinars, checklists, access to assessments ongoing to monitor progress”

“Better communication to parents about how much support they are getting and a weekly update”

“Weekly or bi-week "check ins" - short and to the point e-mails (before the last week before the end of the quarter) - keeping our son on track.”

The following lists other miscellaneous **suggestions/requests** made by parents. The ones listed in the first grouping were mentioned by multiple parents and listed in relative order of frequency. The ones in the second grouping are more one-offs, listed by only one or two parents, but were nevertheless deemed helpful suggestions.

- Social/group skills programs
- Homework help
- Buddy system

- Mental health services
- Assistive (and regular) technology trainings and help
- Support groups
- ABA therapy at school
- Lunch Bunches
- IDEA trainings
- More help with transition out of high school
- Academic support for SOL track students with LD. Passing an SAT
- Executive function training
- Co-teachers and/or read aloud for honors classes
- Talk to text software
- Intellectual disability support not specifically geared toward Autism
- Typing lessons
- Tutoring/IXL membership
- A PTA for parents with children that have special needs
- More resources for vision therapy and sensory issues
- Parenting techniques or tips
- Workshops working parents can actually attend.
- Produce short and concise videos in multiple languages about such resources - not all parents can afford the time to come to seminars and information sessions, and not all parents can read, or read English.
- Have a website dedicated to special education within LCPS. This web-site could help direct parents find information easily.
- Having access to the Parent Resource Center over the summer and allow them to review IEPs again and refer to advocates and community resources (Arc of Loudoun) for help.

LCPS Communication and Support

This section asked parents for feedback about **communication with parents by LCPS**. The specific question to them was this:

What would you like to see LCPS do better or differently in terms of communication and support to parents/guardians of students with disabilities?

Although some parents requested less communication and more succinct/less repetitive notices/reminders about the same events, the number of parents asking for more communication outnumbered those asking for less by about 3 to 1. The comments below asking for more regular communication were representative:

“A monthly email from therapist/teacher or resource teacher with progress notes, what we can do at home to support child further and suggested resources or additional activities available to the child”

“I never received any from my child's middle school speech teacher all year. So, I feel disconnected from that part of his IEP, progress or otherwise”

“I rarely get an email from LCPS admin providing information. For example, I never received an email about the summer town hall meeting (concerning the 2020-21 SY) for parents of SPED students and coincidentally heard it from a friend”

“Would like to receive emails with specific info on programs LCPS is hosting for students or parents instead of just peach jar fliers and info about when SEAC meeting are”

“Send out a calendar of events prior to the start of school with planned events and then email a month in advance of added activities so parents can plan ahead”

“Regular updates instead of just reporting problems”

Many parents requested more support for how parents can help at home:

“More communication on how we can help at home”

“Provide training to parents on how parents can help their child learn the way they learn”

“We would like to receive take home material that we can work with our child to help him

succeed and develop better reading skills”

“More solutions to support executive function that do not replace the child’s function with adult intervention would help the child to build the right skills”

“More panels and workshops that focus on at-home behaviors”

A few parents suggested that LCPS start and support transition planning earlier:

“The communication of transition education planning has gotten so much better. Would be nice to inform parents of the importance of educating themselves on these things much earlier in their child’s education.”

“Start to inform parents in ES of options their kids have for HS. We worry!”

There were a number of comments expressing the belief that students with disabilities are not given the same amount of attention by LCPS as “gifted” high-achieving students, as reflected in the below:

“Administration often recognizes students that are gifted and talented--sending emails to parents and postcards to students; however, kids in special education also need encouragement and recognition in ways to show that admin are also paying attention to their achievements too”

“I think the administration at my local school absolutely has my child's interests at heart but I don't think at the district level there is much thought given to children with special education needs. There is much more focus and praise for high achievers/ "gifted" students. LCPS does not put as much value of minds that are different as they do those that are status quo”

Make meetings/trainings more useful and accessible for parents:

“Hold meetings after school not during school hours”

“Hold after hours or weekend meets for kids with IEPs to meet others that go to other schools.

Worships on weekends, parents and child activities on weekends. Parents work or have more siblings so is hard to attend on weekdays”

“Offer things at other times or record them so we can watch them at a later date”

“I attended a parent training on dyslexia but when I got there, it was overcrowded, it was a presentation, no room to ask questions and they didn't finish the presentation and said if we wanted the rest of the information, we could get it of the webpage or request by email. It

seemed that it was a check-the-box event for the presenters and there was little to no interest to what questions the parents in the room had or a respect for our time. When the few parent events on dyslexia happen, they are at the main office in the middle of the workday, it is clear it is not meant to meet the needs of parents”

“I would like to see all programs/trainings, etc. be recorded and available online. There is no chance that I can drive all over and then to Ashburn by the time these things start”

The following **miscellaneous comments** were rare but nevertheless worthy of reporting:

- We really enjoyed the LCPS-sponsored special needs fairs and special events. Please, please find a way to continue these. We found out about so many after school activities this way.
- Too many LCPS 'specialists' are putting out tweets from their personal social media accounts, requiring parents to follow 20+ out-of-touch administrators. Why doesn't LCPS have one unified source of information, rather than forcing parents to constantly check emails or personal webpages/social media accounts?
- Timely communication using the same delivery methods each time to avoid confusion. Announcements (or a link to them) should be on the main page for the school instead of assuming that everyone knows which social media to check for certain activities.
- Specific guidance counselors for students with disabilities and emotional disturbance are needed
- Provide more activities and resources for the deaf and hard of hearing
- Once a week OT or Speech services are not sufficient- LCPS should look into extending the frequency of these services
- It would be really helpful if there was some sort of website that showed all of the resources available to students with disabilities and their families. There seems to be an unspoken "don't ask/don't tell" rule within the LCPS administration, and it really makes it seem that the county isn't looking out for the best interest of its students
- I wish that the software/procedure for writing IEPs made adding parent input more streamlined.

- Childcare is a major issue when your child can't go to a "regular" after school daycare. There are no options for afterschool care for children who have IEP's which leaves single parents like myself to constantly look for after school sitters that cost significantly more than a daycare center would. Additionally, Loudoun County Family Services was absolutely no help in this area and the childcare website I was referred to is out of date.

Instructional Services

This section asked for parental feedback about the instructional services received by their child.

The specific open-ended item presented to them was the following:

Please use the space below to provide any additional information about the areas above: (Instruction)

Several parents expressed a desire for **more communication about the instruction received** and child progress:

“They never EVER sent in ANY study guides or worksheets or any communication about what our child was learning. There was no communication with us unless I asked specifically what was going on. It's almost as if the teachers were told not discuss anything with me if the AP wasn't present”

“There was a very noticeable lack of communication with parents. This meant I did not know without asking what the educational plan was for the year/quarter/week and how my child was tracking to expectations. What could I do as a parent beyond read books to them? I would have appreciated more knowledge sharing from teachers where they explain what they're doing and how they're doing it so that I can do the same at home. More communication and sharing of knowledge are needed”

There was some concern about teachers of **elective classes not understanding how to deal with IEPs**, as indicated by the selected comments below:

“Electives at our school did not have/make accommodations for our student so she had to drop electives which she had originally planned to take”

“Elective teachers need to make themselves more aware of the students IEP and their accommodations and needs”

There was some concern expressed about **not enough of a focus on writing**:

“There is not NEARLY enough focus and practice on writing, especially longer papers and research-based papers to prepare kids for college”

“The focus for my child has been on functional activities with less emphasis on academic goals, particularly in the areas of reading and writing. I believe that my child has the ability to learn to

read and write; however, we were discouraged from including these as goals in his IEP. My sense, correct or incorrect, is that teaching my child to read and write would be too labor intensive, and therefore he was directed towards other functional goals. Learning to read and write are both necessary skills for independence later in life and failing to include these as academic goals is a disservice. As a parent, I should have advocated harder for reading and writing to be included as goals in my child's IEP; however, I was repeatedly told that he was learning these skills because the classroom was a "language rich environment."

LCPS Services Received

One section asked about parental satisfaction with LCPS services received. The item was as follows:

If you would like to elaborate on any of the areas above (LCPS Services), please do so here:

A frequent concern noted by parents was the **lack of stability over time in case managers** – it is problematic that they change every year, etc.:

“Case managers need to be with ES students throughout their ES career as much as possible. I understand people move and numbers change but I would love to see students have the same case manager so they don’t have to start all over each year”

“I would love my daughter to have the same case manager in order to continue building an existing relationship. The time it takes each year for her to build relationships with her new teachers takes away from her moving forward with her academics. I also would like her to follow one consistent reading program. Over the last 3 years, she has used 3 different programs because she has had three different case managers”

“I believe it would be beneficial for a student with an IEP to have the same case manager for the length they are in school. Specifically middle and high school. The same way a counselor rotates through middle and high school”

“Wouldn’t it be better if the student retained the same case manager year over year vs getting a new one?”

There were some concerns raised about **ESY**:

“ESY is absolutely terrible, LCPS only seems to do it because they have to”

“Many kids who need ESY are unable to get it. You need to change your qualifications for ESY and make it more accessible for children who really need it”

“ESY should be for high-functioning students, like FCPS, not just for low-functioning students only”

“ESY should be an option for all students with IEP, not based on qualifying”

More frequent communication with parents about how the child is doing is needed, according to many parents:

“Would have liked better communication regarding my child’s daily progress and behavior”

“I receive very, very little information regarding my child’s school day from staff. My child has limited speech so we can’t get information that way, and not much is even written on progress reports”

“IEP reports showed indicators of progress and improvement, but as parents we had very little information about either the day-to-day implementation of the supports and interventions”

“I had to inform the IEP manager when assignments were missing and when grades were at failing level. I would like to see a more proactive approach instead of reactive”

“He would get behind in classes and I wouldn't find out until it was late in the quarter. He was supposed to be monitored for work completion but I don't think that happened”

Many parents asked for **more training for teachers and TAs** on working the students with special needs:

“We need more trained teachers that specialize with kids on the Autism Spectrum. More inclusivity practices for kids that are high functioning and in the general education classroom.”

“Better qualified support for in class support.”

“Teachers are caring and doing their best, but need more training on alternatives that could work better for kids.”

“I would also like to advocate for more training for TA's that support the classroom and sped teachers. My daughter has had many wonderful, caring and well-meaning TAs that have worked with her one on one, but I've also heard them say things that are not effective for a child with special needs. Since TAs spend so much time one on one with the student, they deserve to have more specific special ed training”

A notable number of parents mentioned getting **less support in the upper grades** i.e., in high

school, as indicated by these illustrative quotes:

“My experience is at the high school level - they just do NOT do very much - put themselves out - they are not teaching goals. They do not address the IEP goals truly”

“They wanted to cut services from MS to HS which I thought was a bad idea - doesn't seem like a good way to transition. We'll throw into the deep end with less support”

A few parents commented on the need for **more/better use of assistive technology**:

“Also, assistive technology has not been as widely used as it could be, ie: voice to text, etc or other ways of helping a student communicate what they've learned”

“There were not many options for assistive technology-same thing offered every student”

Finally, a variety of more rare but **helpful suggestions** are listed below:

- Would be great if LCPS offered Adaptive Behavioral Analysis as a therapy
- There needs to be more emphasis and assistance in helping with oppositionality due to ADHD. It would help the children learn, and should be treated as an aspect of their disability rather than an unassociated behavior problem
- I also would like to see additional OT and speech services/specialists at school
- I would have liked to see a plan for summer to focus on my child's areas needing improvement.
- Loudoun County needs to hire more African-American men as teachers and administrators. Not enough men for African-American boys to look up to

Student Placement

There was an open-ended item about student placement:

If you would like to add information regarding your student's school or class/program placement in the 2019-2020 school year, please do so below.

There were not many responses to this item. The few comments below seemed somewhat informative.

- Was given no placement options and I think another placement could have been better for my daughter. Not allowed to visit any ESCE classrooms.
- My child's speech teacher had far too many students on her caseload which led to frequent meetings requiring her attendance meaning she had to cancel many sessions
- My child needs a program for kids with high behavioral needs and average academic ability, and there really isn't an option for that available.
- The teacher has too many students to serve



Mental Health

The next section asked about parent ideas about how to best support student mental health. The item specifically asked was the following:

“What suggestions do you have for how LCPS could better support students with disabilities' mental health?”

There was a strong general sense that not enough was being done to support student mental health – more personnel, training, resources, etc., should focus on mental health outcomes. This was made even more intense by the transition to virtual learning. There were a variety of thank you's to awesome individual school counselors, but generally, the request was for **more trained personnel in this area** and for **more resources to be spent here**. Out of ALL of the qualitative responses provided in this entire survey, the sentiment expressed below was the **STRONGEST and most CONSISTENT of ALL feedback given from parents** (as indicated from the exemplar quotes below):

Need for more and better mental health services:

“Across the board, increased staffing and support is needed to specifically help address these issues. There simply aren't enough qualified, trained staff to help students whose mental health is suffering, with or without disabilities!”

“Utilize other professionals that are trained in mental health besides counselors”

“Add mental health as required training or augment staff with mental health professionals”

“Offer to the parents that they can elect for their child to see a counselor every quarter. Or greater if needed”

“Although LCPS has counselors working at the schools, it seems they oversee too many students. Students are made aware that they can reach out to a counselor but I think students feel awkward and or embarrassed. Students should all be REQUIRED to check in with a counselor, this would remove the stigma students may feel”

“Hire more school counselors, and not ones who split time. Counselors who get to know their students” “Greater staffing for mental health!”

“There should be more counselors. One counselor for an entire school just isn't enough”

“Make counselors more accessible, they should be in contact with parents of SPED kids. There should be monthly or quarterly check ins with parents”

“Counseling sessions every so often should be mandatory for kids with disabilities”

“Hire more counselors, produce and distribute short videos on mental health issues for families and students. Address difficult issues - suicide in particular - and do so regularly”

“Make counseling a regular part of an IEP to tackle potential issues before they become large issues, normalize mental health in the schools for all students”

“We need to have more support personnel (counselors, social workers etc.) We feel like the caseloads are too high and personnel are not able to spend enough time with students and are not able to reach all students who need or want help”

“The county needs to reduce the caseload for counselors/social workers/psychologists so that they can adequately serve the students that need them”

“I feel the county or schools should offer free and more frequent individualized counseling support (not just group or once a month)”

“Stop saying that counseling services are available to all students when you won't include them in anyone's IEP”

“How about requiring them to see counselors, rather than just providing the "opportunity" to do so? Many special ed kids can't advocate for when they need to see a counselor. Counselors seem to have plenty of time on their hands to see special ed children, as they spend a lot of time in the hallways between classes "high-fiving" students. That is NOT counseling”

“Hire more mental health professionals at the middle and high school levels”

“I think that a weekly check in with a school counselor for a few minutes would be a wonderful thing for ANY kid, but especially ones with disabilities or ones that show signs of struggle”

“We need guidance counselors dedicated to students with disabilities. At the high school and middle school levels, these guidance counselors should have regularly scheduled meetings with students with disabilities. At the elementary school level, guidance counselors should make

modified lesson plans for students with disabilities, regularly visit self-contained classrooms, and have routine lunch buddy opportunities with the students”

“We are not aware of any mental health services from LCPS. We have had to seek out support from outside professional services”

“Debería haber psicólogo en la escuela, que ayude a niños con sus problemas, con sus miedos”
[I wish there were a psychologist at the school who would help children with their problems, with their fears]

“Psicologos en las escuelas” [Psychologists in the schools]

“Que tengan un terapeuta dentro de la escuela” [Wish they had a therapist inside the school]

There were numerous calls for the formation of social groups and buddy programs to help students have friends they can talk with about mental health issues:

“Any kind of buddy program would be nice so that my child doesn't feel so alone during unstructured time”

“Implementation of a buddy system could be a great idea. A person that will be and talk to your child in the school. For example, that person will be like an adult friend that will help my child through her school life. That person is going to be a friend (need to understand her diagnosis) and know how to communicate with the kid. Not an aid, a teacher maybe a counselor, but needs to be involved in my child life”

“Specific social groups for kids with same age and issues”

“Additional group opportunities; peer groups; Buddies program”

Numerous parents suggested that more reception to parent input here would be good:

“Parent input. Ask if they feel their child would benefit from school mental health support. Being a child of color in the climate we live in, he’s endured racism from peers that he hasn’t always shared with us. Having support in place would be helpful”

“Stop ignoring parent input. Stop ignoring outside professional input. Mental health is a VERY serious issue in children with disabilities. And it presents in many different ways. Our limited experiences thus far with the counselor and social worker have been profoundly disappointing and frustrated”

“Make sure the parents know that this is there for them. Depression is a huge problem for adolescents and especially ones with disabilities. Parents of children with special needs are also exhausted and drained and need someone to inquire how they are managing it all as well”

There were numerous concerns by parents about bullying in schools and requests that more be done to help prevent and remediate this:

“There has been SO much bullying at my daughter’s school, she has been the one to get told all types of things about how she’s fat, ugly, no one wants her there, etc. for a child with an emotional disability, these types of issues are compounded. Every single time she’s asked for help from “Counselors” they say the same thing. “Just ignore them.” THAT advice doesn’t work! And I’m frankly SICK of it. Either have the correct training, or the correct openness and freedom to actually do their job. It feels like they are simply place holder”

“Protect them from bullies. Reprimand bullies and discourage it with real tested results-driven programs to prevent it. Stop having teachers look the other way. It is seriously affecting the development and lives of the victims. My son’s life has been interrupted and delayed at the hands of LCPS failing to protect him and rectify the bullying that was rampant in his elementary and MS years”

“Work more on bullying within schools. Speaking with older students with special needs. Even kids with mild anxiety are suffering from bullying in schools. Talk to parents, it is happening a lot more than you think. A lot more than is being reported”

“The resources for how kids are bullied need to be modified in such a way the kid being bullied has a feeling of safety and is not made to feel excluded. I feel teachers sometime brush off the incidents as "kid stuff" as opposed to how emotionally damaging it can be to the child”

Misunderstands and use of exclusionary practices for child misbehavior related to mental health were noted as a problem here, as is the case in other school districts:

“My daughter was suspended for 17 days for maladaptive behavior which was ridiculous since she didn’t understand at all that her behavior was disruptive. I had to attend numerous meetings as if she was juvenile delinquent. We moved her to a different school but the whole process was so elaborate: endless meetings sometimes with six-seven people at a time - because that’s required by the regulations - and everyone knew that she had severe intellectual disabilities, the class she was in did not fit her, small room, no space to move, kids who were more advanced and the teacher who could cope. After a certain number of days of suspension, they said we had

to have meetings after every next suspension which was just crazy. Finally, everyone agreed that we should move her to Intensive Behavioral Support program where her behavior improved immediately, no suspensions, no major issues”

“The school doesn't know how to handle my son's behavior and mental issues. Every time he has a fit, instead of improving and treating his behavior, they tell me to pick him up from school. There is no point in sending him to school if his teachers don't even make an effort to resolve his behavior. By making me take him back home during one of his meltdowns, our safety is endangered as well because I cannot contain his behavior while driving by myself. I have told the school that I do not have a second person in the car with me for it to be safe to take my son home, but they insist on me picking him up anyways”

The following miscellaneous comments and suggestions seem potentially useful:

“The mental health is not met for any child at LCPS. The county seems to be too concerned with data that may reflect poorly, and then does absolutely nothing to address the mental health issues that are plaguing the schools, so counselors are not allowed enough time to meet with groups or individuals, the teachers are tasked with protecting the rest of the children in the class from students who clearly need more help. Something needs to be done”

“Bring back programs like YAP and/or alternative schools. Not every student thrives in a typical school environment”

“Suicide remains the leading cause of death of kids within LCPS. This is horrifying. I am aware of many kids with mental health issues, including suicidal ideation who are doing MUCH better while not in school. This is very troubling to me as well”

“Integrate yoga, meditation, and other forms of mental strengthening into the curriculum. Use apps like Calm to teach kids how to cope with stress. More ABA therapy and other developmental techniques offered in the classrooms”

Parent Resources and Support

The following question was asked:

If you'd like to add anything about the resources and support available to parents/guardians, please do so here:

Here there were useful comments about the **Parent Resource Services (PRS)**

- The PRS is a wonderful service. They have been very helpful over the last 3-4 years with education, training, and navigating a system that is always against our child and us.
- Previous resource staff were AMAZING!! Current staff are not helpful nor are they well-informed.
- Potty train workshop was very helpful
- I was not aware that PRS did anything besides workshops. Better communication with parents about the services available would be nice, maybe a workshop or open house on services.
- Promote all services offered. It seems all I see are workshops.
- Would you send more Parent Resource Services information to all parents within LCPS?
- There are many workshops I see on the PRS emails that we cannot attend. I'm not aware of any place where we can get a transcript or even the slides for the workshops, so I feel like we're missing out on information that would be helpful.
- Record workshops. Publicize workshops. Ask parents what they want to know. Hold workshops at schools.
- I wish there was another location aside from Leesburg. The classes are usually early and because I have to get my son to school, it's hard to make it to Leesburg in time
- Would love to attend, but husband worked afternoon and nights. Have something available during the day
- How about a LCPS special needs parents meet and greet, coffee hour so parents can network?
- Please use language that normal people without a M.Ed. can understand.

Distance Learning

Finally, there were two open-ended items about families' experiences with distance learning (pertaining to Spring 2020 during the school shutdown).

The first item had to do with **what worked well**. The item was as follows:

Thinking about your student's overall experience during distance learning, what worked well for your student?

There was a clear consensus that what worked well for most students was any **one-on-one time**. Many parents mentioned that the one-on-one activities, either one-on-one Zoom meetings with the teacher or speech therapist, or resource teachers worked best, and second-best was any smaller-group virtual meetings, as indicated by the following sample comments:

“When the teacher and related services spent more one on one time helping me to problem solve on how best to make the materials provided work for my child”

“The large group virtual class meetings were not good”

“It was too much overstimulation when he attended the live class, so he skipped most of the live classes”

“Interactive Google meet teaching”

“The resource teachers had twice weekly google meetups with my child to answer questions and teach concepts one on one”

Many parents mentioned **flexibility** was key, and that **working at the child's own pace** (rather than strict deadlines) worked well:

“Flexibility with turning off the camera, getting up from the desk/table during meetings.”

“Working at his own pace not being rushed”

Many parents also mentioned that frequent check-ins, and clear organization, clearly stated weekly/daily expectations was important:

“Getting a brief weekly call to check on his emotional state”

“Info broken down by expected work completed each day”

“A checklist of what was completed and what was still pending”

“Routine. Resources and lessons the teacher designed. She made her Google site full of lessons and activities similar to the classroom and sent individual plans and activities as well. And she always checked in with us”

“Having a teacher who was well organized and provided information and lesson plans in detail.”

“Teachers who were available and responded to email and checked in periodically”

A sizeable number of parents went out of their way to mention how important **getting assignments read aloud to them** (either by the teacher directly or through assisted technology) was for their child’s progress:

“Having a program on his Chromebook that was able to read instructions for assignments”

“Having the assignments read to them (recorded by teachers so they were more easily accessible)”

“Virtual speech worked well”

“Read to text”

“Stories being read by familiar faces (other teachers and librarian) is important. They would normally see these faces in school so it’s nice to see those faces on the computer too”

Other positive things mentioned by the parents, but less frequently, as being helpful were the following:

- When the teacher got away from Edmentum and created their own lessons
- Hyperdocs were easy to access
- The structure of the hyper docs and Google classroom
- He enjoyed logging into Seesaw for the few interactive activities provided
- He needs more content and fewer “optional assignments”

- Google slides that allowed my student to input answers directly into the slide
- The online applications he was used to at school like RazKids, Dreambox
- Social skills group video chat
- Khan Academy. Because it was some actual instruction.
- Language Live
- Reflex Math

The second item had to do with what didn't work well and what needed to be changed/improved. The item was as follows:

Thinking about your student's overall experience during distance learning, what do you feel could have been improved or done better/differently?

As to be expected, given the unexpected pivot to online learning and all the other challenges of COVID in Spring 2020, there were many, many complaints from parents about how online learning was terrible and didn't work well for their children. Similarly, there were many appeals to please get back into the classroom as soon as possible, etc. Alternatively, a (much smaller) number of parents praised LCPS on how they handled things during this difficult transition to virtual learning. Below are the most frequently cited suggestions for improvement for next time, should this happen again.

The most common complaint/suggestion was simply that more time with humans and teachers, and support personnel was needed:

“More time with teachers explaining the curriculum over the computer or taped lessons”

“More time with teacher on Google Meet, therapists working with child (ours did not)”

“More time with special educational teachers”

“More teaching time”

“More contact with teacher”

“We definitely need more synchronous learning. The videos were ok but I would like for the teachers to be able to teach live remotely”

“We need significantly more teacher-led instruction”

“They need actual instruction and support not just told to go to a site and work the slides”

There were numerous suggestions for **more coherence and similarity across classes/teachers in the platforms and mechanisms used** – i.e., pick one system/platform and stick with it, as indicated by the following typical comments:

“Put all assignments in one place (all teachers using same format, instead of some website, some Google classroom, etc.)”

“Continuity between all subjects on platforms used”

“Use either hyper docs or Edmentum, not both”

“Schoology may help - one website to find everything.”

Numerous requests were made to have more focus/support for student’s social skills, socioemotional health, physical, and well-being needs:

“Much more focus on how to support socioemotional development. More consideration for ESY”

“The biggest thing is opportunities for socializing. Perhaps assigning small groups of students (group of 3 but no more than 4) just to socialize. Make that be a part of a regular school structured curriculum”

“Offering social skills classes, even if recorded, would have been something”

“Ability to interact with other students in the classroom, for example a Google meet PE class or lunch bunch”

“Kids need movement and learn better in an environment that lets them learn while “playing”. Working on a computer doesn’t work well. Maybe having the teacher come meet the student outside and try to engage with them while staying socially distant”

“I believe if more focus of creative/fun ways to get the child to read and write are created, maybe, just maybe, the other things may fall into place”

“Loved the social meets from FORTitude. So did he”

There were several requests for more support/training for parents:

“Exposing parents to what tools the students would be using and how to support / check their work ahead of the school sessions starting”

A training video or training session for parents on how to use Google Classroom”

There were numerous suggestions about how to deal with **grading, requiring assignments vs. making them optional**:

“Classes/meetings need to be mandatory”

“Most work should be graded. These grades should count for passing or failing. If grades are optional then my kids do not get motivated to study”

“Even though not for grades, assignments were labeled as submitted late which was disheartening for my kid”

“Consider electives being pass/fail during a pandemic and academic classes being graded”

“Please DO NOT tell students beforehand that their distance learning grades would not count toward their final grade. That was very counterproductive”

“Reassessing the SOL requirements for specials. For example - my son was being assigned a big slideshow and video assignment for the gym portion of PE that found overwhelming alongside the other work he had been given from his academic classes. I would recommend that for the gym portion of PE, it might be more effective if the teacher had a weekly check in with students to see what they are doing for exercise, staying healthy, and giving suggestions for other things kids can do for exercise”

There were lots of **complaints about Edmentum**. No respondent had a good thing to say about that platform.

The **other miscellaneous comments and suggestions** below were rare but reasonable and worthy of consideration:

- Access to tutoring from the school system to assist with the homework (which was what would really be classwork) - even if it is online is really needed.
- There was no verbal communication, everything was written, so when

someone has a delay or disability with language this just amplified the disability.

- I did not like Flip grid postings, because every parent can see your child and their abilities. This felt that it violated our privacy when kids were asked to read on camera and submit for all to see or for their writing to be on display. Any parent can watch your kids upload. It is different when parents view your child on campus. Usually, personal work activities aren't shared with every parent in the class. It felt unsafe, as other parents viewed your child's skills or lack of on screen, in the privacy of their home. On campus, a parent wouldn't be asked to work with a child if a teacher suspected they couldn't keep skill level confidential.
- Using Google slides instead of Google docs with the worksheets embedded in them
- Captions are an absolute must on everything. Every teacher must know how to turn them on and make them available as well as understand the importance of face availability for lip reading.
- Case manager should be checking in daily to see if the work is being done.
- Generally, I think that Khan Academy style presentations could have been used more regularly to present topics by the classroom teachers.
- I did like the Raz Kids from last year. We LOVED Kids A-Z. We missed Reflex Math, which was a great resource for our other child.
- I am not at all impressed with DreamBox for math instruction - did not work well at all for my student.



Suggestions for SEAC Meeting Topics

One of the open-ended items asked the following:

“Please provide any suggestions for presentation topics at 2020-21 SEAC meetings”

The most commonly suggested topics were as follows:

- Social and emotional development/health (in general for teens and during COVID)
- Dysgraphia, and math disabilities
- Ways to help with homework for ADHD kids.
- Transition to post high school/college planning/job/career paths
- Guidance on special education resources in college
- Effects of Covid (Lack of interaction with other kids, Seclusion)
- How to help with reading and math fluency
- Dyslexia

Other topics mentioned (but less frequently) were as follows:

- Please have individuals with special needs who are successfully employed come and talk to students and parents and let them learn from their experiences
- How to encourage teamwork and learning for all using PBL's
- Supporting twice-exceptional students
- Role of SIF-R in IEP
- School referrals for outside assistance at qualified locations in regards to emotional and psychological needs
- Parent support groups for specific disabilities
- How to teach special-needs children to identify if they are being bullied

- How to deal with social anxiety
- Discussions around SPED children who are in a general education classroom
- Differential characteristics of Autism in girls and related mental health issues
- Anxiety and depression
- Topics geared toward middle and high schoolers. Most are for younger kids
- What about having a panel of groups that offer support and what they can do to help (like the MDA Muscular dystrophy Association has camps and events)?
- Alternative therapies available through IEP. Music Therapy for example has proven to have many benefits, and lots of other states will contract out music therapists and bill Medicaid to provide services in the school setting via the IEP. My child would greatly benefit from one on one Music Therapy rather than put into an “inclusive“ music arts class where none of the curriculum has been adapted so that my son can participate.
- Other topics than just ADHD and Autism!
- Guardianship
- Special Olympics

General comments about suggestions for SEAC meetings included the following:

- Zoom meetings, weekend meetings, after 7pm meetings
- Online meetings/webinars so all can participate virtually, or can review after work
- I have enjoyed all of the topics at each SEAC meeting! They are very informative
- I'd love to see the dyslexia simulation done some evening, as a topic of discussion. Another great speaker and presenter is Dr. Sandman Hurley, from the Dyslexia Training institute in Southern California. She did an overview for Fairfax County schools, that they hired her for to evaluate

how they handled dyslexia and gave suggestions. She's the top in the field and very informative

- The SEAC meetings seem to be dominated by presentations and information coming from LCPS. I would much rather see the content of the meetings happen more organically and allow for MUCH more community participation. Currently it seems like the meetings are an opportunity for LCPS to pat itself on the back by saying how much they're doing for students with disabilities and then it's very awkward/uncomfortable for community members to voice their feelings since it's "clear" that LCPS has it handled. SEAC just feels like an extension of LCPS.
- I want outside speakers not LCPS employees